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ABSTRACT

Educators contribute to children's anxiety and pain when they fail to provide children with information about loss and death and ways of coping with loss and death. Children who are denied factual information about experiences of loss and death develop fantasies and misconceptions regarding the experiences and suffer more anxiety and pain than they otherwise would. This paper provides educators with information about concepts that preschool children are capable of understanding during times of loss in order that educators might help young children develop coping skills to use during grieving. The paper describes: (1) different feelings of grief and loss preschool children may experience when they are unable to keep or have someone or something that is meaningful to them; (2) factors that affect preschoolers' understanding of the grief process, such as their limited concepts of death, time, and emotion; (3) behavioral changes of preschool children who are affected by a death in the family; (4) stages of grief experienced by preschoolers; and (5) signs and symptoms of reactions to loss. Helping a child work through the grieving process involves adults' open expression of thoughts and feelings, honesty, and provision of an atmosphere that is safe and friendly. A list of nine behaviors to avoid when helping a child work through the grieving process is provided. Contains 54 references. (SM)

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GRIEF AND GRIEF PROCESSING FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

by

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PREFACE

It has been said that "grief is a sign of love. If a child is old enough to love, the child is old enough to grieve".

A natural part of the life cycle is death and loss, yet when adults educate young children, the subject is often omitted. But death and loss do not wait for us to be ready. Death says to us, "one, two, three, here I am, ready or not." Unfortunately, young children, during their early childhood years, experience many forms of losses; loss of a toy, pet, parent/grandparent through death or divorce. As educators, we do these children a terrible disservice when we fail to provide young children with information about loss and death and how to cope.

Children who have been denied factual information will develop fantasies and misconceptions regarding the event. Because of their misconceptions, children will suffer more anxiety and pain than is really necessary. They will be pushed into what is now termed as "grief overload".

All children will be affected in some way by a death or loss around them. Children who are too young to understand an explanation need love from significant people in their lives just so that they can maintain

their own security. Young children may not verbalize their feelings about a loss, and because they hold back their feelings, they may appear unaffected. It is very possible and very common for the young child to express his/her feelings through behavior and play. Regardless of the ability or inability to express themselves, children will and do grieve and they grieve very deeply.

This paper is written to help educators understand the child in relation to preschool child characteristics and concepts that the child is capable of understanding during the times of loss. In turn, the educators will be able to teach young children about loss and help them develop coping skills to use during grief events.

GRIEF AND GRIEF PROCESSING FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

Death is a natural part of the life cycle, yet this subject is often ignored, omitted and denied by adults when educating young children (Conner, 1989). Unfortunately, children experience many kinds of losses during their early childhood. Loss of a parent/grandparent through death or divorce, pet, toy or moving (loss of friends and neighborhood) are the most common types of loss for children. To keep children uninformed about death is a disservice. Talking about the concept of loss before a death experience can eliminate misconceptions and children will suffer less pain and anxiety during the actual experience. While children are learning about the aspects of grief and grief processing, they also learn about coping skills and how to help themselves and others work through the process.

As adults, we have a difficult time teaching children about grief and grief processing. The way we, as adults, react to the concept of death is determined by the baggage we have accumulated in loss-related experiences throughout our life experiences. Many adults have problems dealing with death so the adult assumes that children will cope poorly also. Adults

also may try to protect children by omitting discussions of rituals that are associated with the death. Not knowing leads children to become anxious, bewildered and alone. They are left to seek answers on their own to important questions. This is an important time for gaining new information to help and reassure the child. It is because of this lack of knowledge and understanding that they especially need to talk about death. The patterns of coping that are established in loss experiences determine our patterns of coping skills for a lifetime and form a baseline for teaching others about grief and grief processing.

The objectives of this paper are to:

1. Describe different losses that a preschool child may experience.
2. Describe characteristics of preschoolers in relation to death.
3. Explain behavioral changes of stressed preschool children.
4. Describe stages of grief experienced by a preschooler.
5. Discuss signs and symptoms of reactions of loss.

DEFINITION AND TYPES OF LOSS

A child experiences loss when he/she is unable to keep or have someone or something that is meaningful to him/her. Children experience loss in many different ways. Five of the most common are:

1. Feeling of loss and grief because of a separation from a toy.
2. Feeling of loss and grief because of a death of a pet.
3. Feeling of loss and grief because of a divorce of significant others.
4. Feeling of loss and grief because of a death of significant others.
5. Feeling of loss and grief because of moving.

STAGES OF GRIEF

Adults need to review and understand the stages of grief that a preschooler will experience.

Stage 1 - Early Responses

(includes denial, shock, and numbness)

Stage 2 - Acute Grief

The center of grief includes: sadness, depression, guilt, anger, fears, anxiety, regression, and physical distress.

Stage 3 - Adjustment

This is the painful acceptance of reality. Reorganization and re-establishment of life will follow.

These stages will occur with any/every loss and each of these experiences of loss varies in degree of grief experienced and intensity of feelings. The first one--loss and grief because of a toy--may last only a few minutes. The death of a pet could last days, while divorce and death of significant others last for months and even years. There is grief in moving even if the child moves only a few blocks. Children need help from all of us to help them learn ways to deal with loss, how to understand what it is, what is happening to them and how to work through the stages of grief in a

constructive way so that they can heal and continue with life. The stages listed above will occur, with some intensity, with every loss.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRESCHOOLER

Preschoolers have certain characteristics that affect how they understand the grief process.

Limited Concept of Death

Preschoolers have limited concepts of death. Many preschoolers, depending upon their stage of development, believe that dead is simply being less than alive. Very young preschoolers have just recently incorporated the concept of object permanence into their cognitive thinking. For this reason, during a traumatic loss, this security can be easily shaken. If a child is told by a well-meaning adult that "Grandpa went to sleep", they may become afraid to go to bed or to sleep. The preschool child takes words so literally that adults must be very clear when explaining death; that sleep and death are not the same.

Limited Concepts of Time and Emotions

Preschoolers may frequently ask when the deceased is returning. They ask these questions because they have a very limited concept of time. Preschoolers also seem to ask about a person who has died with very little emotion. Adults may be surprised about

questions that are asked and especially that little emotion accompanies the child's statements. Sometimes preschoolers appear with an attitude of indifference. The preschooler asks, "When is sister coming back?" or "Let's go get a new brother?" These statements seem uncaring, but in reality, the preschooler is limited in cognitive skills that would help him/her understand the grief/loss process.

BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

All children are affected in some way by every death in a family. Preschoolers are not always able to tell someone how they are feeling so they show their feelings by behavioral changes. Children of all ages can regress developmentally when under stress. They return to behaviors that had been given up prior to the loss. These behaviors include thumb-sucking, temper tantrums and excessive clinging.

Preschoolers, who are experiencing a loss, may also experience normal fears becoming larger. The death experience causes the child's world to be disrupted and fears may become intensified. They have an increased fear of a new place, a dark place, fear of an adult leaving or fear of going to sleep. It is not unusual for the child to experience changes in eating and sleeping. They may also develop bowel and bladder

problems, stomachache headaches and/or rashes. Preschoolers may have increased periods of sadness, crying, boredom, outbursts, anger or anxiety.

When the mother is caring for a family member who has special needs, there is less time to spend with the child and the child may wish that the person was not there or dead. Preschoolers often have fantasies that lead to quilt feelings. When the death occurs, the child will experience intense guilt. The adult needs to ease these guilt feelings by explaining that "just wishing" does not make it so. Explanations help the child understand that he/she is not responsible for the death.

Children must learn to deal with loss because pretending that the loss did not happen will not make things go away. Significant other adults can help the children acknowledge and accept the loss by allowing the children to share the loss experience, working them through that process and help them let go of the loss.

Other Reactions To Loss--For the Preschooler and Kindergartner (3-5 years), Particularly in Divorce and Death

DIVORCE

1. Fear of abandonment, separation, school phobias
2. Regression--returning to security blanket, bed wetting, soiling, etc.
3. Macabre fantasy--attempt to explain what broke up parents
4. Bewilderment--not comprehending present changes in relationship; defining territorial questions, "That is mine"
5. Fantasy denial--fantasy of getting together with missing parent
6. Play--create well-ordered family life in play, disruption of pleasure line play, construct unsafe play worlds of hungry, assaultive animals
7. Increased aggression--more irritable, aggressive play
8. Suppressed aggression--to point of becoming fearful of attacks
9. Guilt/self blame
10. Emotional need-hunger for affection and physical contact even from strangers

DEATH

1. Trouble handling abstractions such as heaven
2. Sadness
3. Process grief well if not discouraged from doing this
4. Bewilderment--not comprehending present changes in relationship; defining territorial questions, "That is mine"
5. Escape into play--at times get mind off of loss through play, seem not to be reacting to loss
6. Increased aggression
7. Giving up attachment--must deal with actual loss of loved one
8. Idealize lost person
9. Attach to substitute people--teacher, neighbors, etc.

(Reactions to "Loss for Divorce and Death" from "GRIEFBUSTERS" Hospice of the Monterey Peninsula)

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Preschool children are curious about happenings in the world around them, but their literalness can present them with a lot of difficulty in understanding their world. During a loss, it becomes hard for them to comprehend changes and still work from their frames

of references. Adults must understand some very basic principles about the cognitive abilities of the preschool child. Only when we begin to relate to the child on his/her level will the adult be able to help the child work his/her way through the grief process.

1. A child will sometimes be confused about the differences between types of illness. Cancer or heart disease sickness is different than a cold, fever and other sickness that they may suffer. Reinforce the difference between these two types of illness. Saying "John was sick and went to the hospital and died" is not very comforting to the child. The child may be extremely fearful if he or someone he loves has to go to the hospital in the future.

2. Death is not the same as going to sleep. Dying in bed or in a prone position is merely a mechanical phenomenon. It can happen that some people die sitting up. People usually do not feel good so they lie down. Being evasive may multiply problems later so give the facts to preschoolers gently, but give the facts. "Grandma will sleep in peace forever." This explanation may result in the child's fear of going to bed or to sleep.

3. It is God's will." The child will not understand a God who takes a loved one; "He needs that person Himself;" or, "God took him because he was so good." The child may decide to be bad so God will not take him, too.

4. "Daddy went on a long trip and won't be back for a long time." The child may wonder why the person left without saying goodbye. Eventually, he will realize that daddy is not coming back and feel that something he did caused daddy to leave.

5. "Daddy is up in Heaven and watching over you." This explanation is meant to be reassuring, but a child may perceive and understand it as an image of a spy who knows everything about you all the time.

Children should be told about a death immediately and straight forward. Be honest with your answers before and after a death. Sometimes we can be more helpful by saying, "No one knows for sure but I believe . . .," or "I've wondered about that too." This special kind of honesty is helping to reinforce that you do not know all the answers so it is okay if the child does not have all the answers either.

FUNERAL SERVICES

A common question frequently asked is, "Should a preschooler attend the funeral or memorial service?" Many experts state that the answer will vary with children from ages 3-6 years. A child should not be forced to go, but rather encouraged to be included. Funerals are a way for the child to say "goodbye". The child should understand that others will also be there to say goodbye. There is comfort in knowing that others share the grief.

For all who attend, funerals are a "reality marker". A funeral will acknowledge the death and help the child confront its reality. Confronting the death with others allows the child to accept the death and will reinforce that it is certainly a sad time. Crying should be encouraged at the funeral but also stressed that it is "okay" to cry at any time. When families attend funerals together, support is given that helps each of them move forward together in their grief process. When a child is excluded from attending the funeral, he/she misses the opportunity of moving forward with the rest of the support group.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Children's concerns do not always reach us through conversation. Sometimes they come less directly--

through play (Rogers, 1979). Play is an important part of the healing process. It is a fundamental way for them to work out their feelings. Children pretending to be sick or ill may even try to re-enact the funeral. This is normal. This is a necessary part of the child's healing. It may be shocking to adults, but it is important therapy for the preschool child. Adults should not respond with disgust or shock, but be sensitive to this type of play.

BEING STUCK IN A STAGE OF GRIEF

Watch closely for signs that a child may be stuck in the grief process. Such a child will display marked change in personality and may show extreme anger, fear, disbelief, guilt and panic. They may daydream excessively. The child may have trouble sleeping or sleeping too much. They may become withdrawn and isolate themselves and have a decreased appetite. They will fear abandonment and have an increased fear of illness. They can experience sudden attacks of stealing, drug involvement or delinquency. Any child may demonstrate some of these behaviors and feelings when first experiencing the loss; the intensity and duration of their behaviors and feelings are red flags for alter problems.

HOW CAN WE HELP THE PRESCHOOLER?

Grief is a lonely, intense and personal experience. Children grieve and they grieve for a very long time. When a child loses a significant adult, he/she most likely loses a nurturer, protector, teacher and role model. Adults can be helpful to the child by the way that they respond to death. When adults express openly their thoughts and feelings, then children will feel free to also express themselves. Always be honest with the children and share your true feelings with them. Provide an atmosphere that is safe and friendly. Listen intently, always reassuring the child that it is all right to have feelings of loss and pain. Explaining to the child that grief is a process gives the child permission to work through the grief process at his/her own pace. Continue to give positive feedback to the child and keep all confidences unless the child's safety is threatened. Encourage the child to talk because not talking about loss will not make it go away. Give the child enough space to laugh, play and experience a good time. Reassure the child that having fun does not mean that you love the person any less.

While helping the children through the grief process, follow these nine "don'ts":

1. Don't judge
2. Don't blame
3. Don't criticize
4. Don't give advice
5. Don't do most of the talking
6. Don't tell the child that you know all the answers
7. Don't put off answering questions
8. Don't give undefined answers--give straight forward answers
9. Don't answer questions above the child's level of intelligence

During the adjustment stage, watch for signs of healing. Adjustment happens when the child accepts the reality of the death, even though it is very painful. The child will need to reorganize his/her life around the new circumstances. Finally, they will re-establish normal relationships and activities. When a child passes each milestone, he/she will show progress in his/her grief process. This is important because they are also learning valid coping skills that can be applied to loss that is experienced later.

In helping children understand how to cope with death and learn healthy coping behaviors, remember four key concepts:

Be Accepting

Be Consistent

Be Loving

Be Truthful

Preschoolers worry unconsciously about three basic questions--be ready with your response:

1. Who will take care of me now?
2. Will this happen to me?
3. Did I do or say something/anything to cause the death to occur?

CLOSING

Mead has observed "When a person is born we rejoice, and when they're married we jubilate, but when they die we pretend nothing happened." If adults avoid a child's questions and curiosity regarding death, then the child often associates fear with death. When denied information, or given misleading concepts, children continue to think and worry about death. If children are forced to conceal their natural emotions in childhood, problems may develop later. The grief and fears of childhood are best expressed during childhood (Kubler-Ross, 1983). Unless provided with proper information and opportunities to openly discuss this subject, children may become confused and deprived of the right to mourn. Unable to mourn, children may not work through feelings of grief, guilt, or depression, and may never develop a respect and reverence for life. Children will encounter death no matter how much adults try to shield them from it. Adults who lend support, offer guidance and provide information help to prepare the children for the day when they must cope with other losses.

References

Reading can be helpful in talking to the preschooler about a loss. Books are certainly not a substitute for shared discussion, but can stimulate the child's thoughts to be curious about certain questions. Once questions are asked, the child will be capable of organizing his/her schemas about losses and death concepts enabling the child to confront his/her thoughts, fears and feelings that will accompany a loss.

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Other Sources of Help and Information:

Your pediatrician, clergyman, local community mental health center.

An organization for parents of children with cancer: Candlelighters Foundation, Inc., 123 C St. S.E. Washington, DC 20003, (202) 483-9100.

For parents of children who have died: Compassionate Friends, P.O. Box 3247, Hialeah, FL 33013.

For parents who have lost infants to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS): National SIDS Foundation, 310 Michigan Ave. S., Chicago, IL 60604; International Council for Infant Survival, 515 Fifth St. N.W., Washington, DC 20001.